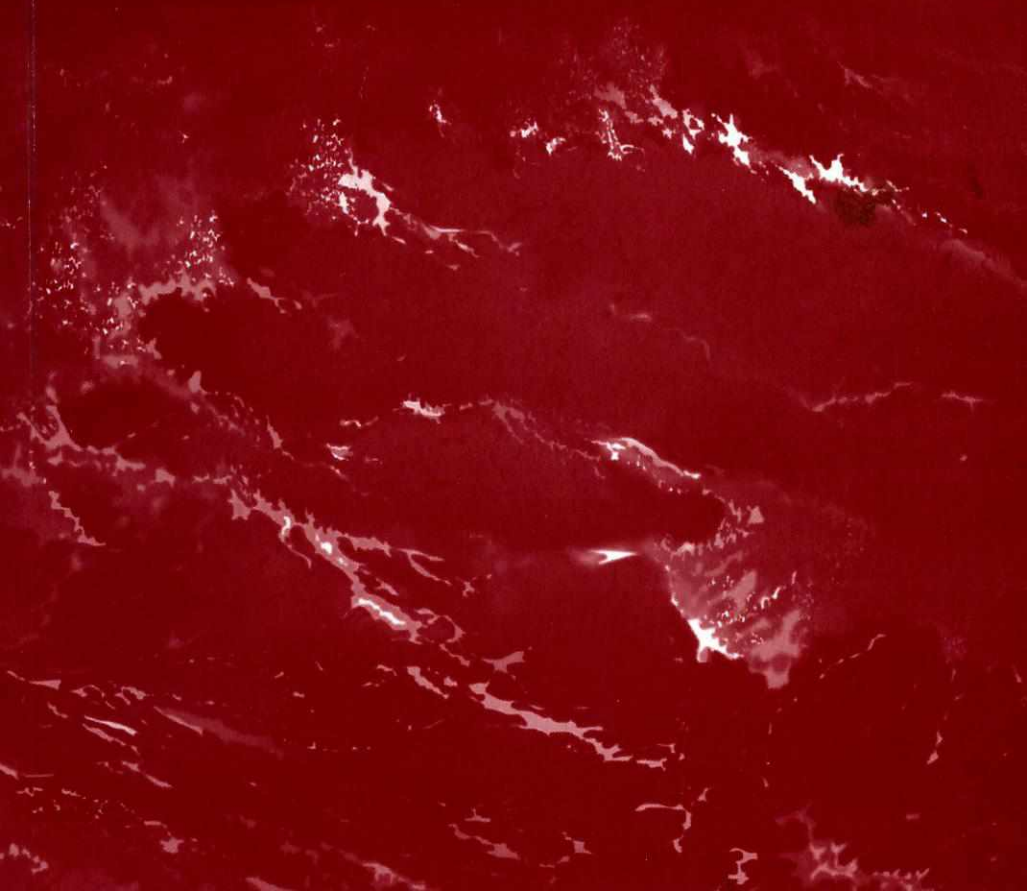


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ORAL TRADITION IN CHILDREN EDUCATION: A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH WITH EDUCATIONAL DRAMA

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Abstract

The age-long tradition of impacting and preserving traditional culture, norms and values through oral tradition is gradually disappearing into thin air with the advent of transcultural development, exposure to foreign media of communication, influx of alternative entertainment and social media platforms. Whereas we secretly crave for our children to embrace our traditional values, the means of transference has perpetually eluded ever busy career-driven urban parents who themselves hardly enjoyed the lore of oral tradition. This paper espouses a performance approach that relies on a process-based technique in impacting children using the basic principles of educational drama. This paper shall therefore propose a bridge of oral traditions using the techniques that abound in educational drama to inculcate basic traditional values lacking in modern family life through school curriculum.

Keywords: Theatre, oral tradition, educationaldrama, process drama.

Introduction

The traditional culture of infusing societal and family values into the younger generation in the typical African society is a far cry from what obtains now. This culture has consistently declined in urban African societies in the last four to five decades. In the first decade and half or so of post-independence Nigeria for instance, the craze for white-collar jobs climaxed in a frenzy. In the immediate past post-colonial era, a few of the populace who had embraced the Western culture of the colonialist still had under their pallet the euphoria of a boisterous indigenous experience they were too reluctant to give up after a contagious romance with Western-styled education. The Western content of oral tradition as at the time of impact with the blacks had matured into stylized storybooks and fairytales that sounded so grandiose that African oral culture paled in comparison to it. The supposedly superior culture of the West was imposed on the seemingly backward cultural practice of every other country they encountered. In a UNESCO pilot project on the preservation of oral tradition in Indonesia, Czermak *et al* observe thus:

On a popular level, Western interpretations of other cultures supported the notion of cultural superiority and were used to justify colonial control of non-western societies and indigenous peoples. On a deeper level, continuous imbalance of power in controlling cultural representation contributed to general views that a western-oriented education system was the best means to promote economic development (3).

The claims of cultural superiority because of a long history of literary documentation however did not in anyway eradicate the presence of a vibrant and flourishing oral literary tradition. Ruth Finnegan finds that both kinds of documentation had existed even though one form was not so popular amongst the colonial analyst. She wrote:

Africa possesses both written and unwritten traditions. The former are relatively well known [...]. The unwritten forms, however, are far less widely known and appreciated. Such forms do not fit neatly into the familiar categories of literate cultures, they are harder to record and present, and, for a superficial observer at least, they are easier to overlook than the corresponding written material (2012:3).

This presumptuous position of cultural superiority became a benchmark for selecting an elitist lifestyle that has resulted in a near extinction of the traditional mode of education, which over time sustained valuable

cultural hegemonies for centuries. Despite the stance of superiority of culture in the West, the culture of expressing the vibrant tradition of indigenous life still survived somewhat to an extent that parents who were direct immigrants from the rural areas could still find time to relate orally traditional lore, fables and legendary tales to their children at night, while an everyday conversation was still punctuated with parables and traditional idiomatic expression translated to suit new rural lifestyles.

Influence of Transcultural Development on Oral Tradition

The craze for economic empowerment coupled with fear of poverty as a result of the gross incompetence of postcolonial leadership in Nigeria influenced to a large extent the sharp growth of brain drain in the 80s. This situation left numerous skilled workers no choice but to seek greener pastures in the developed world. The exodus further deepened a transcultural change that institutionalized a mindset of inferiority and loss of confidence in our traditional cultural heritage and belief system. Thus a new wave of cultural identity of pseudo-Nigerian/pseudo-Western hybridity emerged. It became commonplace to hear young people who may or may not have travelled outside the shores of this country speak in the American ghetto slang, dress and even walk in imitation of Western lifestyle.

In traditional African society it was common practice to sit together around a fire after dinner to re-enact folklore or fables. This meeting point fostered a communal bond that encouraged inter- and intra-personal relationship amongst families. The advent of newer methods of teaching, communication and entertainment has received a massive transformation in recent times. It has become very easy to quickly reach people around the globe within seconds with the advent of the Internet and numerous social network platforms available to us today. Therefore, social activities like oral tradition are the least concern of ever busy career conscious individuals. The truth is that cultural values that were sacrosanct and preserved in our oral tradition are either lost or do not even exist for most of us. But in the recess of our subconscious, we remember mostly through the little oral schooling we have got, the beauty of our traditional and vibrant style of oral education and living. But as Czermak *et al* put it, "local communities themselves often do not see the importance of preserving their oral traditions, their IK (Indigenous Knowledge) and their languages. They

consider their own cultural heritage as backward and as a hindrance to their ability to access ‘modern society’ and economic wealth (4). Reminiscing on the origin and forms of drama in Africa, Mineke Schipper recalls:

The ancient literature has been transmitted orally from generation to generation. The story-telling performance itself is the essential part of oral literature. In narrating the old stories the main point is the sung or spoken performance: music, singing, dancing, mimicry, masks and costumes... the oral “text”. The narrator improvises on familiar themes, while the performance proceeds within a fixed frame of traditional ritual actions, formulas and refrains (55-56).

Traditional festivals and indigenous cultural practices no longer sound entertaining with the advent of alternative mediums of entertainment like television. Recently introduced “get rich quick” reality programmes rocking the air waves like Big Brother Africa, West African Idol, MTN Project Fame, Gulder Ultimate Search, Star Quest, Nigerian Idols et cetera have fast replaced whatever was left of our indigenous culture. Chioma Ugochukwu attributes these newer trends to beliefs that older modes of educational communication are “obstacles to development” (2008:36) and that the only way to be relevant in today’s world was to use foreign cultural values to alter our indigenous belief system.

Educational Drama and Its Principles

Children, like pre-historic man, create their own reality essentially to understand difficult situations and phenomena of life. As children build a symbolic world around themselves they try to rationalize situations in the eyes of their adult role models who could be their parents, older relatives, caregivers, or anybody around their immediate community. The child often achieves this sub-reality in role-play. The boundless benefit of the experience of role-play in educational drama cannot be overemphasized. Children learn by watching, observation and doing what they have learnt from adults exactly in the same way oral tradition was used for teaching and transference of knowledge mastered through observation and constant practice. Through the practice of oral arts human beings mastered deep cultural values and represented them in their daily living. John O’Toole in Foreword to *The Arts and Australian Education: Realizing Potential* expressed the use of oral tradition for transfer of knowledge thus:

Once upon a time, all over the world, no children went to school, because schools hadn't been invented. But children and young people still learned all they needed to become useful grown-ups in their community. They did this by listening to their elders, who told them wise stories and sang songs with them; together with the adults they danced and made music and performed the deep ceremonies and necessary lore and laws of the people; with the adults and each other they drew patterns and painted pictures and fashioned sculptures to create and communicate images and meanings; they invented stories that, although make-believe, were models of both the real world and other possible worlds – and they brought the models to life by acting them out (2010:iii).

The above illustration simplifies the totality of the essence of educational drama defined variously as a child-centred educational method that “focuses on how the child rapidly fruits up in knowledge acquisition and utilitarian values that are derived therefrom” (Ododo 2000:142). As conceptualized by David and Behm (1978), educational drama is “an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centered form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact and reflect upon human experience” (qtd. in Brennan 2008:1). In Margret Lepp's view,

Educational drama stimulates our imagination and our ability to empathize; it's a form of learning that provided opportunities for cooperation, shared reflection, personal and professional development. Thinking about, and solving problems together helps deepen a learning process. And when we look back, we remember what we have experienced (qtd. in Claessen 2011).

Lepp is reputed for integrating methods of educational drama in teaching student nurses in order to aid their professional competence in dealing with patients. She notes that memory research has discovered that “we only recall 15 percent of what we hear”. In this regard, it will be appropriate to state that the act of learning that involves students in a dramatic hands-on performance experience would help them retain the process of learning deeper than when discussed in passing from storybooks. The principle employed in educational drama process equips children to remember values and knowledge gained during the process. Jonas Basom enumerates some benefits of educational drama as educational pedagogy:

Incorporates elements of an actor's training to facilitate the students' physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development.

It is a multisensory mode of learning designed to: increase awareness of self (mind, body, and voice) and others (collaboration and empathy); improve clarity and creativity in communication of verbal and nonverbal ideas; and to deepen understanding of human behavior, motivation, diversity, culture, and history. It also employs the elements of theatre—costumes, props, scenery, lighting, music, and sound—to enrich the learning experience, re-enact stories, and mount productions (2005).

Techniques of Educational Drama: A Performance Study of Redeemer University Theatre

In the seven years of its inception, the Theatre Arts Department has consistently engaged children resident in primary and secondary schools of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) Camp, both in Mowe and its environs in a semester educational drama process. As at today a total of fourteen (14) performances have been recorded in this regard. At inception, the method of engaging the children was in the more liberal Children's Theatre aspect of the course that essentially entails devising a play skit and teaching the children directly using every feature of drama to instruct them with the ultimate goal of producing a children-centred performance for children and adult audience alike. The setback with this method, as was discovered later, was that it did not encourage complete participation in the process by the children. Instead, plays or stories were drafted from the point of view of the student facilitators handling the projects. As a result, the children were not even able to recreate the art form they were rehearsed to reproduce. On the part of the facilitators, they claimed that the excitement of participation on the part of the children was often mechanical since they were not always given opportunities to create their own stories by themselves. In 2012, the facilitators engaged a core educational drama method that emphasizes a process-based performance approach, rather than the professionally based approach of mainstream theatre for children that leaves the children more entertained than educated.

Though this paper stresses the use of the educational drama process, it does not in any way demean the mainstream children's theatre methods. The emphasis on educational drama here is based on the process that enables children's vibrant participation. Besides, educational drama can only work for children aged seven (7) and above. In the performance analyzed below, only three tools were employed to guide the children's innate ability of role-play in realizing a process-based performance that gave the children an interactive and solid

practical experience in their performance.

Nigerian Independence

In the last encounter with the children, the facilitators focused on a select group of children whose ages ranged between 7 and 12 years. The group decided to work around the theme of Nigerian independence. Instead of the usual tradition of imposing theme stories and play skits on the children, the children were asked to come up with ideas from which a workable theme could be derived. As a group, they scrutinized and selected from suggested themes to realize the theme of independence they selected.

Some Educational Drama Tools Employed

Breaking Inhibitions: During the session children in the group felt empowered enough to discuss confidently and freely with one another. The power of liberty they enjoyed broke every form of inhibition associated with children working in a group under the watch of adults, and this sparked long-term cooperation and theme spirit amongst them throughout the process of the performance. On reaching a workable theme, the facilitators who doubled as teachers-in-role, guided the children to select different activities for the impending production. Part of the acts they selected was researching on and performing a play based on the personalities of some exemplary presidents and iconic leaders in the history of Nigeria from Independence in 1960 till date. The children themselves discussed names of presidents and iconic personalities that had tremendously impressed them in their history class and picked roles based on their selection. After this session, they were asked to interact with their parents and teachers to source for information on the remarkable personalities and their specific contributions to the development of the Nigerian political and economic life.

Scenario Making: When they met to share ideas and proceed with playmaking, they were too eager to recount the various discoveries made during their field work. With the professional guidance from their teacher-in-role, they restructured their discoveries through improvisational techniques into a workable scenario. As they discussed, each child participant suggested how best they thought their stories could fit into the plot being constructed. There were points of arguments of course as some of the children wanted their stories to be the dominant parts of the play.

Selection and Development of Characters: As soon as a satisfactory scenario emerged, each child was asked to pick a character in the play they would like to perform. As expected, the stimulating discussion of their project made some children anxious to play roles of characters they had not researched into themselves, while some other children held on to their characters because at this point they had developed a level of attachment to and pride for their research figure.

Having completed the self-casting exercise, each child was put on the hot seat to develop the characteristics and psychological constitution of their characters. The children bombarded each child on the hot seat with questions and proffered dramatic solutions to seemingly difficult conflict areas in their friends' analyses. With the assistance of the facilitators all grey areas were cleared and, even though the dramatic conflict was not perfectly resolved, in the final analysis the production was a commendable performance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The example above was not used to teach traditional lore and "cultural values". But it established the thesis that educational drama approximates a holistic process of learning and teaching that can re-institutionalize the oral tradition and help preserve important cultural values in the minds of the younger generation of children. The teaching of traditional lore and cultural values can help in rebuilding healthy family units with the ultimate goal of achieving a national cultural identity, as opposed to living a borrowed and imported culture.

Historical adventures, mythical and legendary tales that instill a commendable value system can be reincorporated into our school curriculums right from the primary level and taught using the techniques of educational drama. A policy on drama in education should be introduced in primary and secondary schools by education planners and teachers should be empowered to implement it. Schools should have in place a programme for continuous training of teachers to constantly orientate them on newer methods and principles of educational drama. If an act on educational policy on educational drama is passed and implemented, it is not only children who will benefit from the programme, parents and teachers will also profit enormously from it, especially if the process-based technique of educational drama is adopted. Furthermore, it will create jobs for young theatre graduates who may want to pursue a professional career in this area.

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